

“I’m going to dance again”

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Life is not a smooth journey. Turbulence, ups and downs are order of the day. The winner in the game of life is one who overcomes adversities and is undeterred by any challenge. Just as the crushing of a rose brings out its sweet fragrance, so the difficulties of life release the sweetness within us. Many a time adversities shatter our dream. It is only a person of strong will who despite his weakness and shortcomings rises above the sorrow of life to find more meaning to his life. Here is a story of one such dancer who met with an accident but through sheer dedication, devotion and commitment to her dance she could make it back to the stage again. Even that doctors believed Sonal would never dance again. She had met with a serious accident and had lost her legs. But Sonal Mansingh refused to believe the doctors. She believed in her potentialities and



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April 20, 1975. Bombay’s Rang Bhawan was full, the audience waiting impatiently. In the green room, Sonal Mansingh anxiously looked into the mirror and saw beads of perspiration shining on her face. Her hands and feet were cold.

She had felt like this once before – on her maiden performance in Bangalore. But that was fourteen years ago. Since then she had danced in India and abroad; she had been praised by everyone.

Today, however, Sonal was making a new start; this was the first time she would dance in public after a car accident in which she had been seriously injured just eight months earlier. Had her struggle to dance again been worth it? She pulled herself together, and with quick jingling

steps was on the stage. The spotlights were on her; she bowed, hands folded, and began her performance.

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In August 1974, Sonal Mansingh felt on top of the world. Trained at first in *Bharat Natyam*, she had mastered cult style and then had turned to *Odissi*. Now she was among the country's best classical dancers.

She was in Germany that month, teaching a course in Indian classical dance. Late on the evening of the 24th, she and her fiancé, George Lechner, were driving at 110 kph down a wet, lonely road. They suddenly saw a deer standing in the middle of the road. Lechner jammed on the brakes. The car slipped sideways, swung around, then turned over and rested on its roof. Lechner, trapped between the seat and the wheel, fainted.

"Sonal, are you all right?" He mumbled as he regained consciousness. There was no answer. He groped about in the darkness. There was no one beside him. As he struggled to free himself, a car pulled up and four men jumped out. They forced open a door of the car and dragged Lechner out. "Where is Sonal?" He asked.

Fetching torches from their car, the men began searching for Sonal. They found her about four meters away, on the road, She was still, eyes closed, as if asleep. Lechner was about to pick her up and say, "Let's get going" but he hesitated. "She doesn't look quite alive," he said to himself. Then sprinkled water on Sonal's face. She shook her head. "I'm cold," she groaned. "Please put a shawl on me". Saying this, she fainted.

At that moment, a police car arrived, and soon an ambulance was called. The ambulance men lifted Sonal carefully on to a stretcher and rushed her to the Municipal Hospital. In the emergency room she was given injections to ease the pain and then hurried to the X-ray room.

The X-rays showed that Sonal had been badly injured and had many broken bones. Her twelfth vertebra, four ribs and a collar-bone were fractured. Luckily her spinal cord had not been damaged in the crash. "She'd better be taken to the University Surgical Clinic at Erlangen," the doctor advised Lechner. "They have better facilities."

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At Erlangen the doctors wanted to operate on her at once, and put Sonal into a cast. But, though semi-conscious Sonal shook her head saying "no" to an operation. "No operation, please, unless it is really necessary," Lechner told them. Two days later, Sonal was out of danger and she was put in a cast. This cast covered her from neck to hip and weighed four kilos.



The surgeon drew Lechner aside. "She is in no danger," he said. "But temporarily she has lost the use of her knees, toes, ankles and elbows, it will take months of exercises and hard work on Sonal's part before she can use them."

Twelve days later, the doctors agreed to allow Lechner to take Sonal to Montreal, where he worked. On the evening of their arrival at Montreal, friends visited them and were shocked at Sonal's condition. "The doctors don't know if Sonal will dance again," Lechner told them. "She will need great strength and will power to get well again." One of his friends suggested him to consult Dr. Pierre Gravel, a well-known Montreal doctor.

Gravel agreed to come immediately. But until he had studied the medical report and observed Sonal for several days, he couldn't say anything.

Sonal knew that soon she would be able to walk normally again. But she was growing more fearful that she would never dance again. "What am I alive for?" she thought. "Dancing is my life." For days, she lay on her bed, simply staring at the ceiling. Her mind was sometimes desperate with thoughts of the future. Her appetite had gone, and her nights were often sleepless.

Finally, Dr. Gravel gave his opinion. He examined her, then stood looking at her seriously. Sonal's heart sank. "I am afraid," he began, "that you may be able to dance again." He gave her a broad smile.

Not believing her ears, Sonal made him repeat what he had said, going over the words again and again. "I'm alive again," she thought. "No matter what happens, I'm going to dance again."

After three months, the cast was removed. Now came the period of hard work. For Sonal had to begin exercising. But every time Sonal moved, her muscles, after five months of disuse, hurt badly. Sometimes the pain was so great that she nearly fainted and was on the point of giving up. But years of dancing had given her great mental discipline. She continued her exercises knowing she would dance again.

Gradually, she learnt to move her toes, then her ankles and knees and then her body. Slowly, her health improved. She put on weight, she gained more control over her body. Six months after the accident, she began the basic dance steps that she had first learnt as a child nearly twenty-five years earlier. She lifted one foot and stamped it on the floor. She repeated the action with the other foot. But she couldn't keep it up. Her eyes filled with tears at her own helplessness. The next day, however, she managed it twice.

In March, Gravel agreed to let her return to India. He refused to be paid for his services. "Watching you recover was enough," he said. After a week with her parents in Bombay, Sonal flew to New Delhi to begin serious practice at home. On the first day, with the musicians sitting around her, she couldn't hold back her tears. Neither could anyone else.

Practising thirty minutes a day at first, Sonal gradually increased it to forty-five minutes, an hour, two hours. As the days went by, her body seemed lighter and her dancing slowly gained its former grace. A month later, she was ready.

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At Rang Bhavan, Sonal danced as she had never danced before. She danced for two and half hours. The crowd was delighted. When the

music ended, she stood still, tears streaming down her face. "I have done it, I have done it," she kept repeating to herself. "I have found myself again."

Sonal married George Lechner in August 1975. Today she coaches classes at her dance academy in New Delhi and performs regularly both at home and abroad. "I now realise how precious life is," she says. "Each of my recitals is a prayer and a thanks-giving."

EXERCISES

A. Let's Answer:

1. Why was Sonal Mansingh making a new start at Rang Bhawan? Explain.
2. If you had undergone a similar experience in your life, what would you have done? Would you have resigned yourself to your fate or fought against the odds?
3. Describe how Sonal's car met with an accident?
4. What happened when the car carrying Sonal met with an accident?
5. How was Sonal rushed to the Municipal Hospital? Have you ever extended a helping hand to anyone who is lying unconscious after a serious accident?
6. This accident left Sonal shattered. She met with serious injuries. Enumerate.
7. How did Sonal react after she regained consciousness?
8. 'Where there is a will, there is a way'. How does it apply to Sonal Man Singh.

B. Let's Discuss

- a. Man is the 'Master of His Fate'.
- b. One can always make a beginning.

C. Let's Do

1. Collect photographs of some eminent classical dancers.
2. Do a project work on some important dance forms of Bihar.